

What do architects want from a Green New Deal?

By [Antonio Pacheco](#) • February 7, 2019 • [National](#), [News](#), [Professional Practice](#)



Since the November election, politicians have been promoting a Green New Deal. We talked to architects about what that could and should mean for architects. (Wikipedia/AMIllustration)

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As the scale of climate change has accelerated and grown direr in recent months, upstart politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York have made addressing the issue a central part of their political platforms. Talk of a Green New Deal (GND) has picked up since November's elections, reflecting a major shift in how Americans discuss climate change. But what is the Green New Deal and how might it impact architects?

The impetus behind the GND is simple: Because the threat of anthropogenic climate change is so fundamental, only a government-led, war-like industrial and economic mass mobilization effort can potentially transform American society quickly and thoroughly enough to avoid global catastrophe.

There are plans to unveil the first round of draft legislation at the federal level this week, but as of yet, no official set of policies has been agreed upon by legislators and activists. But various elements of a supposed GND have been touted for years (see [here](#) and [here](#) for thorough explainers).

Generally speaking, GND proponents have three specific and wide-ranging goals:

First, activists are calling for the wholesale decarbonization of the U.S. economy. That means eliminating all carbon emissions across every industry in the country, including in vital sectors

like energy production, building design, construction, and transportation.

Second, this transition would include a federal jobs guarantee backed by the large-scale deployment of new public works projects. A job guarantee, which, generally speaking, would provide anyone who wanted work with some form of federal employment, would allow people currently working in carbon-intensive industries to leave their jobs for publicly-funded green-collar work. The guarantee, supporters argue, would create a vast, fairly-paid workforce that could get to work transforming American society right away.

Third, activists pushing the GND generally agree that the transition to a carbon-free economy must incorporate socially-just practices that rectify past practices that have exploited certain communities. Such reforms include finding ways to house people displaced by climate change, countering the long-term effects of redlining and the racial wealth gap, and making sure that unlike the original New Deal, the benefits and jobs created by any GND are enjoyed by people of color and other historically marginalized groups.

The initiative would go beyond simply greening the country's energy grid or incentivizing a shift to public transit and electric vehicles; the GND envisions a top-to-bottom reworking of the U.S. economy. Likely, the effort will involve densifying existing cities, building new ones from scratch, and perhaps most importantly, retrofitting and upgrading nearly all of the country's existing building stock. Architects will be vital to the effort and are likely to benefit from a potential GND through new commissions and opportunities to provide input and expertise across a range of projects and scales.



In an effort to help spur discussion among architects on a potential plan, *The Architect's Newspaper* asked designers from around the country to share their wish lists for what a potential GND might include. The responses span a range of issues that touch on the built environment, project financing, building codes, and environmental regulation, among other topics.

For some, creating incentives to reuse and retrofit existing buildings could be a key component of the deal. Karin Liljegren, principal at Omgivning in Los Angeles said, "I'd like to see how legislators can reassert the importance of the federal government's Historic Tax Credit Program (HTC). The HTC incentivizes developers to rehabilitate iconic and viable old buildings, but it has recently been under threat after decades of stability. Enshrining these incentives in the legislation would send a massive signal to clients like ours."

But, of course, focusing only on the most iconic historic structures would likely send many

buildings to the trash heap. To address “less iconic structures or ones that require an approach that is more adaptive than restorative,” Liljegren suggested “a program of economic incentives that helps developers prioritize the broader reuse of existing buildings. Reusing a structure can certainly be more challenging than building new, but the payoffs are enormous—less embodied energy and waste is only the beginning. In terms of texture, form, and spirit, existing buildings enrich our identities and communities.”

For other architects, increasing the scope of public transportation options in parallel with boosting density is the way forward. Vishaan Chakrabarti, founder of PAU in New York City, said, “A Green New Deal should include what I called the ‘American Smart Infrastructure Act’ in my 2013 book *A Country of Cities*. In that proposal, I call for the elimination of existing subsidies that encourage sprawl like highway funding, the mortgage interest deduction, and low gas taxes.” Chakrabarti argued for applying this new revenue toward building a national high-speed rail and urban mass transit network that can serve new investments in affordable transit-oriented multi-family housing and low-cost office space. The funding, however, “should only go to municipalities that discourage single-family housing density, like Minneapolis recently did,” Chakrabarti added.

Of course, the overarching network of regulatory policies, like environmental, structural, energy, and seismic codes, that shape the built environment could be improved, as well.

Anica Landreneau, director of sustainable design for HOK in Washington, D.C., pointed to the recently-adopted Clean Energy DC Omnibus Act, which she helped craft, as a potential guide for creating a “self-improving threshold” that requires building owners to retrofit existing structures above a certain size according to rigorous energy performance standards. The plan, set to take effect in 2020, seeks to align the energy performance of existing buildings with the steadily-increasing performance metrics crafted for new structures, like LEED certification and Energy Star ratings. The plan will peg the performance standards for existing buildings to the median Energy Star score for all buildings of the same type in the District of Columbia. As the overall energy efficiency of buildings in the District improves over time, the thinking goes, periodic post-occupancy reviews will help create a self-improving target that will compel building owners to upgrade their structures to avoid fines.

In addition to improving incentive programs like the HTC, changes to the way projects are financed more broadly could also help bring to life many of the GND’s transformative new projects.

Claire Weisz, principal at WXY in New York City suggested the government “require banks to invest a required minimum 40 percent of their loans in building construction and projects that have sustainable longer-term benefits and proven investments in training and hiring for green jobs.”

David Baker, principal of David Baker Architects in San Francisco, advocated for increased funding for affordable and urban housing projects overall. Baker said, “A major limiting factor on beginning to solve our affordable housing crisis—and the associated climate impacts—is simply money. We have many affordable projects ready to go but currently delayed by a lack of funding.”

Peggy Deamer of The Architecture Lobby wants to make sure that the rights of workers—and the right to work, in general—are not left out of the conversation amid talk of green infrastructure and shiny, new projects. Deamer said, “It is too monothematic to go after environmental solutions without the larger economic structure into which both the effort unfolds or the new carbon-free world functions. If the tech industry’s effort at automation leaves most of us without work or income, who wants to live in that green world?”

In conversations with architects, the issue of affordable urban housing came up often, especially in relation to the stated aims of the GND’s main backers, which include increasing social equity through the program. Because America’s urban areas contain 85 percent of the country’s population and are responsible for 80 percent of the country’s gross domestic product, it is likely that the GND’s effects will be most profoundly felt in cities.

That’s important for architects concerned with racial and social equity in the field. With a rising cohort of diverse young designers—as well as many established firms helmed by women and people of color— it’s possible a potential GND could engender a surge of important projects helmed by diverse practitioners. That possibility, when coupled with the existing diversity of urban residents and potential clients, could transform how architecture is practiced across the country.

It’s a realm where Kimberly Dowdell, president of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), thinks her organization can have an impact. “Black architects have a unique opportunity to take the lead in shaping the future,” Dowdell said. “In under-resourced urban communities, which are often majority Black, there is a great need for a new approach to design and development that fully embraces the quadruple bottom line: social, cultural, environmental, and financial.” Dowdell added, “NOMA members have been doing this kind of work for generations. Now, with the Green New Deal, this experience is especially relevant.”

With a “quadruple bottom line” approach at the center of a potential GND, professional architecture organizations pushing for increased equity among their ranks, and demographic trends leading to greater diversity, the architectural profession is poised for significant change that could be accelerated by a GND.

As the potential changes begin to take form, inclusion will likely remain a top priority for designers. Dowdell explains: “In general, everyone needs to have a seat at the decision-making table as it relates to shaping our collective future on this planet. With such a high concentration of minorities in cities, it is absolutely critical that a truly diverse set of minds and voices are empowered to implement the best of the Green New Deal.”